

The Emergence of Dissent

The Reformation settlement under Elizabeth I was perceived by many to be a compromise. As a result, 'Puritans' (sometimes called 'Precisions') emerged arguing for greater purity both in the Church's structure and in the spiritual life of believers. It could be argued that the Puritans dominated the reconstituted Church of England, though some were more extreme than others in their demands for further reform. The most ardent sought to replace the Book of Common Prayer with a purified Reformed liturgy based on Genevan models and the establishment of a Presbyterian polity which would ensure the political independence of the Church (the episcopal structure was in part established so that the monarch – and to some extent the government – could exercise control over the form of worship and ecclesiastical order). Elizabeth opposed such moves and successfully blocked all Puritan reform. Even moderates could find themselves under suspicion. Elizabeth appointed Edmund Grindal (c.1519-83) Archbishop of Canterbury in 1575 (though it seems that Grindal never visited the see, not even for his enthronement!). His predecessor, Matthew Parker (1504-75) had been relentless in his opposition to Puritan clergy, but Grindal sought to be more conciliatory. When he refused to ban 'prophesyings' (meetings conducted by Puritan clergy to discuss the scriptures which Elizabeth had deemed seditious), he was effectively deprived of his position and kept under house arrest. A more militant Puritanism emerged in the 1580s which was given public voice through a series of anti-episcopal tracts written under the pseudonym Martin Marprelate. The result was a further crackdown on Puritanism.

During this period, radical Puritans began to consider the nature of ecclesial order both in terms of the internal structure and governance of the church and in its relationship to the earthly powers. Supposing their conclusions to be based on an interpretation of the scriptures, they concluded that a far more radical reform was required. These Puritans were also called Separatists because they claimed that the church was separate from the world. This was revealed in their belief that the church was constituted not by the inhabitants of a parish but by those who profess faith in Christ. Nevertheless, its primary implication was that the church should be separate from the state.

Although Separatism is acknowledged to be the antecedent of Congregationalism, little is known about the early Separatists because, by their very nature, the separatist congregations had to meet in secret for fear of reprisal from the State and its church. Early separatists were united in their opposition to Rome and its influences on the English church established by law and in their belief that their own ecclesiology was formed by an understanding of the New Testament. There were separatist congregations meeting at Bocking in Essex and Faversham in Kent during the mid-sixteenth century. When their members were arrested in 1551, they confessed that they had not celebrated communion in the parish church for two years. It seems that these churches rejected the doctrine of predestination and emphasized free will and human responsibility, earning them the epithet 'Arminian'. During the reign of Mary I, a 'privy church' met in London and its minister, John Rough, and deacon, Cuthbert

Symson, were burned at the stake during the Marian persecutions. A Puritan congregation was meeting at the Plumbers Hall by 1567, though it is uncertain that it met on strictly separatist lines; its pastor, William Bonam, and twenty-four of its members, were discharged from prison in 1568 only after vowing not to observe communion 'Contrarie to the state of religion nowe by publique authoritie established, or Contrarie to the Lawes of this Realme of *England*'. Richard Fitz seems to have attracted some members from the Plumbers Hall who entered into a solemn church covenant with each other, while a church was meeting at the home of James Tynne, a goldsmith, in the parish of St Martin's in the Fields by March 1568 when it was raided by the authorities.

Though patchy, this evidence suggests that separatist tendencies were emerging in the English church in the sixteenth century, even if it lacked the organization which would normally pertain to a specific movement. Separatism gained theological justification in the work of Robert Browne (1550-1633), educated at Corpus Christi College, whose publications included the polemical tract *A Treatise for Reformation without Tarrying for Anie* (1582). For Browne, the members of the church did not need to wait for the officers of the state (the magistrate) in order to secure reformation. He initially opposed the parish system, arguing that the church was composed of believers and that no Christian required an Episcopal license in order to preach the gospel. Robert Harrison (1540?-1585?) gathered a church at Norwich around the year 1580 with the members binding themselves to each other in a formal church covenant. Both Browne and Harrison, and their respective churches, found themselves in exile in Holland in the early 1580s, but by 1584 Browne was in Scotland and rapidly refuting his former position. In 1585 he conformed to the Established Church. Browne's works were widely circulated and in 1583 a Royal Declaration denounced as 'seditious, schismatical and erroneous' a list of books by him and by Harrison. In June of that year, John Copping and Elias Thacker were both hanged at Bury St Edmunds for promoting Brownist views, while William Denys followed at Thetford for the same reason. To advocate an alternative ecclesial order to that of the Established Church was clearly considered to be a seditious, as was established in law with the 1581 Act 'for retaining the Queen's subjects in their due obedience'. Though aimed at combating Catholic missionary work, the Act prescribed exile or death for all who refused to attend the Parish church or sought to persuade others to do so.

While early Separatism was centred around London, Cambridge appears to have continued to have been its intellectual locus. Henry Barrow (c.1550-93) was an alumnus of Clare Hall while his friend, John Greenwood (?-1593), had been at Corpus Christi. Greenwood was imprisoned after 1586 for worshipping in a conventicle while Barrow was arrested in 1588 while visiting Greenwood in the Clink. By 1590 it is estimated that there were fifty-two Separatists housed in various London prisons. Barrow and Greenwood spent the years 1588 to 1593 incarcerated in the Fleet prison and both confirmed, during initial hearings before the High Commissioners, that they were in effect 'Brownists' who believed that the church could reform itself before it received the state's permission to do so and, possibly more daringly, that the church had the power, through its ministers, to excommunicate the sovereign. Their formal trial began

on 11 March 1593 during which their separatism was denounced as seditious with the intention of destroying the monarchy and the Church. Following two abortive attempts to carry out their sentence – one of which had seen them tied to the gibbet only to be reprieved at the last minute – the two men were hanged at Tyburn on 6 April, it is said ‘as early and secretly as well they could in such a case’.

John Penry (c.1563-93), also educated at Cambridge (and Oxford) followed them to the gallows. Penry’s crime was strident criticism of ineffectual and often absent clergy which brought him into conflict with John Whitgift, Archbishop of Canterbury after Grindal. Penry was associated with Martin Marprelate, though modern scholarship has cast doubt on the claim that he was the author of the tracts. He met his end, aged 30, on the hangman’s gibbet at St Thomas a Watering at about 5pm on 29 May 1593. Whitgift’s signature was the first on the death warrant and the unpleasant prelate refused Penry permission to bid farewell to his wife (Eleanor) and four young daughters (named Deliverance, Comfort, Safety and Sure-Hope) or to make any final profession from the scaffold.

Barrow and Greenwood were executed because they held unacceptable views about the church and its relationship to the state. Penry’s crime was to accuse the officers of the church of failing to discharge their proper duty which rendered his fellow Welshmen in mortal danger for want of the proclamation of the gospel. All three appear to have been victims of the desire by the bishops to make an example of those who refused to conform to the requirements of the Book of Common Prayer by linking religious nonconformity with political sedition. What seems clear from both cases is that the church and state of the 1590s was in no way prepared to consider the right of anyone to exercise the free practice of faith or to countenance criticism in any form. While the political stability of the realm was at stake, with Protestant England under attack – both potential and real – from Catholic Europe, it can still be seen that authorities responded resolutely and sought to clamp down upon, and eradicate, any hint of dissent.

Separatism came into its own in the early years of the seventeenth century. In 1606, John Smyth (c.1570-1612), a fellow of Christ’s College, Cambridge, gathered a church in Gainsborough, John Robinson (1575-1625), a Corpus Christi man, was involved in the gathering of a church at Scrooby and Richard Bernard (1568-1641), formerly of Christ’s College, gathered a church at Worksop. By 1608 Smyth and Robinson had emigrated to Amsterdam with their congregations. While there, Smyth began to propound Baptist ideas and Robinson eventually settled his congregation at Leyden. Robinson came to support ‘occasional conformity’ where the parish ministers were demonstrably godly and this became the pattern for the separatist cause. These principles were taken to north America in 1620 with the departure of the Pilgrim Fathers and this was the ecclesiology adopted by Thomas Helwys (c.1575-c.1616) who established the first Baptist church in Spitalfields, London, in 1612 and by Henry Jacob (1563-1624) who gathered the first church along Independent lines at Southwark in 1616. The Separatists went into exile in Holland and New England in the 1630s, but came to prominence during the Civil Wars and the

Commonwealth due to the support given to Independency by Oliver Cromwell. By that time the cause was being propounded by Thomas Goodwin, Philip Nye, Hugh Peter, Thomas Hooker, John Owen and others who gradually developed these ideas into a clearer form of church polity which would become Congregationalism.

Puritanism grew in strength during the reign of Charles I (1625-49) in part as a result of the reforms associated with William Laud, Charles's Archbishop of Canterbury, who reintroduced much ceremonial into the Church's worship and was fierce in his pursuit of puritans. Laud represented another faction in the Church of England which was battling the other factions in order to dictate the direction of the church. Though in the ascendant for a time, mainly because of the political support of the king, Laud's uncompromising behaviour resulted in moderate puritans rallying against him. This would all reach boiling point during the Civil Wars when a Puritan-dominated parliament rallied against the King. The upshot was that Laud was executed in 1645, the King followed in January 1649 and, for a decade or so, England was a republic, governed by Oliver Cromwell, who considered that a godly commonwealth could be established. For a variety of reasons (which are beyond our interest in this module), puritan political power could not survive Cromwell's death in 1658 and the restoration of the monarchy in 1660 saw a reconstituted Church of England, supported by an Act of Uniformity in 1662, which drove radical puritanism out and secured a context in which Protestant 'Nonconformity' could emerge and, for a time, flourish.